

Wartime Broadcasting

For the first time, the BBC has given detailed access to the plans it drew up in the Cold War for a Wartime Broadcasting System (WTBS) to operate in the event of nuclear war. Paul Reynolds, a former BBC diplomatic and foreign correspondent, has been studying the secrets of the BBC War Book.



The BBC War Book very nearly did not survive the end of the Cold War. When WTBS was stood down in 1992, the then Head of Administration, Margaret Salmon, told Michael Hodder, the BBC official in charge of the plan, to destroy it.

However Hodder, a former Royal Marine and a man of some resource, did not. 'I like history. I can't destroy it. I knew this would be of interest at a later date,' he said.

So one night he loaded up a lorry at Broadcasting House and had the two safes containing the latest War Book (in a big red binder and dating from 1988), its predecessors going back to the 1950s and associated files taken down to the BBC Written Archives Centre near Reading.

The safes were opened for a Radio 4 programme on WTBS in 2008. The BBC War Books in them were briefly described in the programme but only now have they been opened up.

I teamed up with Mike Hodder after we met again, as one does, at a BBC funeral. We had known each other when I was a foreign correspondent and he was a personnel officer in News. One of his first jobs in that post, he said, had been to consider a request by me for a new sofa in our New York flat. He approved.

After some negotiations and deploying the argument that the Government had opened up its own war planning books (which included a section on WTBS), we managed to get access to the BBC War Planning Books and their associated files.

They reveal a world of meticulous BBC planning and typical BBC terminology. Nuclear war is referred to as 'nuclear exchange'. WTBS itself was given the title 'Deferred Facilities'. It was based on 11 protected bunkers spread across the UK. Known as Regional Seats of Government, these would also have sheltered Government ministers and staff from Government departments.

The BBC had a studio in each, usually with five staff drawn mostly from nearby local radios. The BBC headquarters bunker was at the Engineering Training Department at Wood Norton in Worcestershire, where 90 BBC staff would be assembled, including engineers, announcers, 12 news editors and sub-editors, and 'two nominations from Religious Broadcasting'. Output would be controlled by the Government. One bunker, at Kelvedon Hatch in Essex, is now a museum. Its pre-digital BBC studio has a mannequin of Margaret Thatcher making a broadcast. Kelvedon Hatch was one of the potential prime ministerial bunkers, the main one being at Corsham in Wiltshire, under its codename Turnstile, though known as 'Maggie's Bunker'.

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To keep the public amused during Armageddon, a collection of cassette tapes of old radio programmes including the *Goon Show*, *Just a Minute* and *Round the Horne* was kept in a grey locker at Wood Norton. However, it was eventually realised that the tapes could not be used if there was a nuclear attack because radios would probably then be dependent on batteries and these would need conserving.

Choosing the staff to go into the bunkers was a delicate matter. In the early version of the War Books, it is made clear that staff were 'assigned' or 'designated' to go underground. In later, less authoritarian days



they were 'invited'. But even so, some staff refused. There is a note in one file saying that Huw Wheldon, Managing Director of Television, 'refused to take part in the matters dealing with wartime broadcasting'. Other executives did not refuse. Grace Wyndham Goldie was on a list to go to Wood Norton. Peter Dimmock and Paul Fox were 'first alternatives'. In 1964 Alistair Milne, later Director-General, was one of three senior staff named to go to the Corsham bunker.

Curiously, the Director-General had no place in the bunkers. In later editions of the plan at least, the BBC teams were to be led by the Head of Radio 4, perhaps because it would have been a radio-only operation. There was scepticism in the BBC ranks about

remember clearly is coming away in deep gloom and a feeling of certainty that nuclear war was going to happen very soon.'

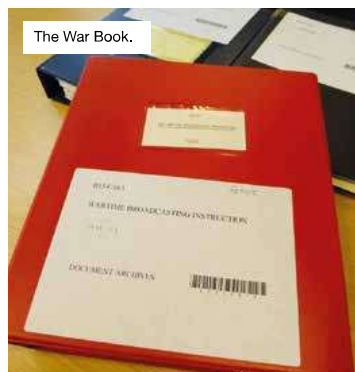
Government codewords for activating the BBC plan are blacked out in the BBC War Book. One did slip through. The codeword for authorising a national warning was 'Falsetto'. Those BBC staff 'required to fill emergency posts would then be given a letter asking if they were 'willing to fulfil' emergency duties.'

There was no special payment for underground duties but at this stage the chosen staff could draw £250 cash advance of salary. It was all very polite. They would be offered transport to their posts, but if they took their own car they would not be able to park it there. As for kit, 'informal clothing only will be necessary'. The letter advised them that they should bring reading material and 'small recreational items'. The letter, staff were told, should be destroyed after reading.

If war loomed even closer, letter number 2 would be handed over. This said: 'You have been selected for emergency duty and you will be going to...'. The bunker's name would be filled in at the time. Delicately, the letter also said: 'The length of your stay cannot be foreseen, but it might be for several weeks.' Staff were advised to take clothes, soap and towels for 30 days. The food in the bunkers (free of charge) would be in packs, with five daily menus. These would provide, it was said, 2,000-2,400 calories per day, with a vitamin supplement. Sleeping would be communal, though suitably segregated.

Broadcast warnings of nuclear attack would have come from the BBC headquarters at Wood Norton. Peter Donaldson, a Radio 4 newsreader with a known and trusted voice, recorded the most recent warning announcement. Afterwards, Michael Hodder said, they rewarded themselves with a bottle of whisky. The recording was played to acclaim at Donaldson's funeral last year. It began: 'This is the Wartime Broadcasting Service. This country has been attacked with nuclear weapons. Communications have been severely disrupted...'

The only time the use of WTBS seriously crossed Michael Hodder's mind was when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. 'I was concerned at once that the Soviets might react badly and that we should prepare. However, my contact in Government did not think so and so we dropped it.'



whether this would all go to plan. Roy Walters, a former senior radio news editor, remembers a Cold War exercise and coming to the conclusion that 'it would probably have been done on the hoof'.

Bob Doran, an experienced editor in Radio News in the 1980s, attended a civil service seminar in Yorkshire. 'I was one of the Dr Strangelove quota,' he said, recalling the moment in the film when Dr Strangelove eagerly describes how well matched couples would go underground to produce a new super race. Alas, the BBC plan was not like that. Most of the staff would have been male. We know this because they were told not to inform their 'wives' they were on the list.

Doran says, 'My clearest memory is of a discussion about whether people with spouses could bring them along.' The answer was no. He also states: 'The other thing I